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**"Snow Storm of Paper":
The Act of Reading in Self-Reflexive Canadian Verse**

Perhaps it is a truism that poetry has always been about poetry and its powers: "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments/Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme." In fiction, this self-reflexive quality also developed early: *Don Quijote* is as much about the writing and reading of literature as it is about the adventures of someone named Don Quijote. Romanticism, of course, brought new self-consciousness to both forms, a self-consciousness based on inquiries into the nature of the poet's imagination. Modern verse and fiction both, however, have subtly altered this focus. The interest of contemporary self-reflexive literature seems to be less in its pre-textual genesis than in its own textual processes. The author's text is seen as activated by the reader who therefore actually partakes of the creative role of the writer by his own act of making meaning of the perception of black marks on white paper.

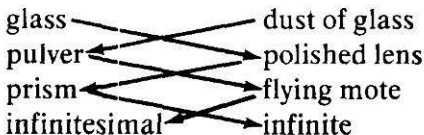
Texts which reveal this modern sort of textual interest in the processes of reading and writing are as frequent in Canadian poetry as in any other, and awareness of this fact might serve to help both in the interpretation of individual enigmatic poems, and in the identifying of structural patterns, as opposed to thematic ones, in our literature. Indeed, even if we begin with the poems of a poet as technically "un-modern" as E.J. Pratt we find many which are self-conscious about language, about its powers and its relation to imagination. As the title of his poem, "*Towards the Last Spike*" (emphasis mine) suggests, it is the *process* of creating lines of communication—be they lines of a railway or of a poem—that interests Pratt. Macdonald, the orator-visionary of the poem, aware of the power of verbal connotation, locks in battle with Blake, with his language of "facts" and "principles," with the "balance of his mind."¹ At first Sir John is in danger of losing: "Passion became displaced by argument" (p. 48); but he fights on, knowing that this is a "battle of ideas and words" (p. 51) and that the orator, like the poet, can sway, can play with the multiple connotations of those words.

Macdonald knows that all Blake's factual rhetoric is powerless; it is his chance metaphors that are so dangerous. In reply to Blake's image—"To build a Road over that sea of mountains"—Sir John prays: "God send us no more metaphors/Like that—except from Tory factories" (p. 53, italics his). But another comes along in the form of a "beautiful but ruinous piece of music," as Blake talks of the nation's wealth "LOST IN THE GORGES OF THE FRASER" (p. 65, emphasis his). But Macdonald's image of a country stretching from sea to sea finally wins out over "this last devastating phrase," for he knows that he first has to convince the Canadian imagination; the mind will follow. Pratt too knows the role of metaphor in his reader's response. "Towards the Last Spike," then, is as much a poem about the power of language and imagination, as it is about the power of man to span a continent with iron rails.²

Other modern Canadian poets have written verse which proves to be even more self-reflexive in the sense that the focus is securely on the process of reading as well as that of writing. One thinks, for instance, of A.M. Klein's straightforward "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" but also of the more subtle and covertly self-conscious section V, the first "prose" part of "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens." This section is not prose at all, except in Klein's linear presentation. It is actually a rhymed sonnet (abba cddc effe gg), a mixture of the Petrarchan rhyme scheme and formal division into octave and sestet, as marked by Klein's own two paragraphs, and the Shakespearean form with its final thematically summarizing couplet. In the twelfth line, the poet hints that the reader should be aware of the hidden verse form, and like Spinoza, decipher "a new scripture in the book" or a new form of writing in the poem. Once found, this form—the sonnet—begins to take on considerable structural significance. The second half of the octave is as follows:

From glass and dust of glass he brought to light,
out of the pulver and the polished lens,
the prism and the flying mote; and hence
the infinitesimal and infinite.³

The complex chiasmic structure of parallels now perceived by the reader as set up by the verse takes on this form:



Klein begins with the concrete (glass) and what is used in its creation (dust of glass) and progresses step by step to the most abstract (infinite) and what it is made of, for Spinoza (infinitesimal). Out of Klein's rhetorical structure grows Spinoza's very philosophical theory of the infinite and of man's relations to it, just as out of Spinoza's craft of lens grinding came his perceptions and theories. Now the real "sacred prose/Winnowing the fact from the suppose" of the first stanza can be perceived. The "sacred prose" is really verse—this verse—which separates or winnows "theorems" ("the fact") from "the abracadabra of the synagogue" ("the suppose").

The structure of the imagery of Klein's hidden sonnet suggests that the act of reading and interpreting, aside from being one of perception, is also one of re-creation of meaning, the poet's meaning. The same duality is also found in the verse of poets as diverse as P.K. Page, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood and Margaret Avison. One of the ways chosen by all of these writers of presenting this theme of the writing and reading of verse is through the use of black and white imagery. Overtly this colour contrast is usually made by these poets with reference to black and white photographs, but it also recalls P.K. Page's "snow storm of paper" in "The Stenographers," and more blatantly, Mallarmé's description of the writer as a man who pursues black on white. The act of writing becomes, like the taking of a photo, an act of perception as well as creation. The product—poem or photo—is in black and white, the extremes of visual perception. P.K. Page, in "Photos of a Salt Mine," makes the point as well that interpretation of that photo (or by implication of the poem) depends on the filter used in perceiving.⁴

The black/white imagery, relating to a photo or to a printed page, also links the *reader's* visual perception to his imaginative re-creating through language of the poet's meaning. Both Atwood and Ondaatje have used this particular realization in their extended and unified books of poetry, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* respectively. In both, however, a certain sinister light is finally cast upon writing, though not reading, as an act of perception/creation. In Ondaatje's work, it is perhaps not surprising to find imagery of photography in that it is a book about perception and the remembering of perceptions. What is interesting is that photography is seen as an art that arrests motion, that fixes the living, that ultimately kills. The shutter of the camera shuts out the source of light. The camera, like the gun, shoots to kill. The poet does as well: the story of the "left handed gun" is told in "Left Handed Poems," as the black framed title page informs us.

Billy's own mechanized camera-like perception—like the poet's—perceives things in black and white, framed by doors and windows.⁵ At one point he watches “the white landscape in its frame,” and tells us that nothing breaks his vision “but flies in their black path.” He sits, “looking out into pitch white/sky and grass overdeveloped to meaninglessness” (p. 74). The book opens with a black and empty frame, with a photo promised but never presented, a photo taken “with the lens wide open.”

The opposition in the book becomes one of free motion and life versus fixed stillness and death. Billy tries to prevent the ultimate stillness of death by providing us with several versions of each death in the work,⁶ including his own.⁷ It is only after his death that Billy is truly still, that someone takes “pictures with a camera”; Billy's final frame is the coffin. Just as Pat Garrett collects dead stuffed birds, so Ondaatje collects perceptions of Billy. Like Billy, the poet is both part of the poem (pp. 40 and 105) and yet outside it, observing its creation. It is a book that is as much about collecting as it is a collection. To collect, to photograph, to kill.

Ondaatje's work is self-reflexive in yet another way. Early in the poem, he provides the reader, as did Klein, with a hint or, even more, with instructions of how to read the work, how the reader should collect *his* perceptions. The poet does this in Billy's voice and in prose: “Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in” (p. 20). The final word play prepares the reader for the evaluation of Garrett shortly to follow: “a sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane asassin sane assassin sane” (p. 29). The final “. . . in sane” now leaps out at the reader. This verbal play can be seen on a larger scale in the mirror poem (p. 27) and in the constant replaying and recomposing of scenes by Billy (e.g. p. 34), including the imagining of various events from different perspectives. Billy even imagines his own death scene: “All this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking” (p. 46).

This attempt at motion, at defying the stasis represented ultimately by death, but also by the fixity of the photography and of the poem, is shared by Atwood in much of her verse,⁸ from “This is a Photograph of Me” to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and beyond. Frank Davey⁹ sees this stasis/kinesis duality as one of space versus time. In “Daguerrotype Taken in Old Age,” Moodie begins: “I know I change/have changed,”¹⁰ acknowledging that the act of taking a photo stops time artificially, makes it into space—the picture. Atwood herself is forced to recognize that poetry shares with the photograph this capacity to fix,

and the use of both modes in her book (as in Ondaatje's) might signal to the reader that the poet accepts the more sinister aspects of her creating. In the Epilogue to the *Journals*, Atwood informs the reader as well that, following a dream about an opera she imagined having written about Moodie, it was both the pioneer's writings and a "little-known photograph" (p. 63) of her as an old woman that were the inspirations for these poems.

The book opens with a poem about cutting the face out of a photograph of the speaker in order to allow "every-/thing" to appear. The second poem immediately introduces the theme of the role of language in perception and understanding. "I am a word/in a foreign language" (p. 11), laments the bewildered Moodie. In "First Neighbours," Moodie faces the fact that she is in an "area where [her] damaged/knowing of the language means/prediction is forever impossible" (p. 15). She knows that language, a sign system of some kind, is a key to comprehension and she wants to have dreams, as some do, "of birds flying in the shapes/of letters; the sky's/codes" (p. 20). Only then could nature's messages be read and understood by her. In "Solip-sism While Dying," Susanna Moodie finally sees that language is both a cause and a result of creation and perception:

the mouth produced words I said I created
myself, and these
frames, commas, calendars
that enclose me

(p. 52)

The framing, enclosing punctuation around the word, "commas," of course also points the reader to the fact that Atwood too produces words, words that enclose *and* create Moodie, that fix life and then, through the reader's perception, give life again.

For Atwood, as for Ondaatje, the black and white photograph becomes an analogue for the black and white printed page of poetry, and both are potentially images of stasis, of fixity, always placed in contrast with images of kinesis, or of the flow of time (and of the temporal act that is reading). Many of the poems of Margaret Avison's first volume of verse, *Winter Sun*, reveal her as yet another of these poets who are particularly interested in problems of perception.¹¹ Her sonnets in this book are also revealing from the point of view of the self-reflexive way in which they confront this same stasis/kinesis dualism inherent in verse. In her poem, "Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet Against Sonnets,"¹² she most overtly presents the fixity of the sonnet form on paper as a "cyanide jar" that "seals life"; sonnets "move/towards final

stiffness." The page, the "white glare," in which the "specimens," once alive, are "cased," is sinister: "Insect—or poem—waits for the fix." The sonnet ends on a similarly static and negative note, with the image of "Adam's lexicon locked in the mind." This is not Klein's "nth Adam taking a green inventory," but something much more formidable that leaves "all living stranger."

This overt self-consciousness about the power—albeit not a very positive one—of poetry might provide a clue to that most enigmatic of her sonnets, "Snow."¹³ Ernest Redekop claims that in this poem, the world "becomes tactile and aural as well as visual, kinetic as well as static, so that space and time are not contained within their usual dimensions."¹⁴ While the recognition of both the static and the kinetic is crucial to an understanding of the poem, this interpretation ignores the progression in the sonnet from kinesis and the visual energy of the octave, to stasis and the aural passivity of the sestet.¹⁵

That this is a puzzling variety of the nature poem is obvious to any reader, and attempts at close analysis have understandably been brief and cursory. It might appear to be a modern example of the prototypical Romantic nature poem in which external nature forms the primary overt subject matter.¹⁶ A certain accuracy of observation of this subject by the poet is not an end in itself, but rather a stimulus to meditation, along both personal and aesthetic lines. Imbued with expressiveness, nature promotes in the solitary poet, and potentially in the reader, thoughts of his own state and of that of art. The poem that recounts this meditative process, then, contains within itself the reason and cause of its being. Given this Romantic archetype and also our awareness of the structures of modern self-reflexive verse, a possible new reading of Avison's sonnet suggests itself. Perhaps "Snow" is a self-conscious poem, that is, a nature poem about perception and also a poem about the reading of poetry. This dual possibility may provide a mechanism for contending with the complexity and ambiguity of the surface verbal level, as well as of the semantic level of the text.

In discussing such levels, however, a methodological problem enters and we need a vocabulary with which to operate. As an exploratory tool, the structuralist distinction¹⁷ between the two axes of the text might prove useful. One of these axes is the paradigmatic one, or the vertical ordering of the poem. Here we will see the work's relationship to variants outside itself on the level of the meaning of both the individual word and the entire text. This is obviously an associative plane of interpretation for the reader. In the case of this poem, we shall see that many words in the more enigmatic passages have double meanings, and

that this duality is what permits the individual words of the poem to be read on two inter-related levels. We shall also see that these meanings of individual words repeat the same concept, much in the same way as Freud claimed that dream images were "over-determined." It is this often reiterated concept, or "archiseme" to use the precise linguistic terminology, that will give the reader the key to that second, less overt, level of meaning in "Snow." Aside from these paradigmatics, however, we must also come to terms with the syntagmatic or horizontal ordering of elements within the text itself, the contextual relations between words (in semantic terms). It is the tension between these two types of ordering meaning that creates both the obvious ambiguity and the complexity of levels of interpretation in Avison's poem.

A structural analysis in terms of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes is obviously going to demand close attention to the text proper. For this reason, it would be wise to have the poem before us:

Nobody stuffs the world in at your eyes.
 The optic heart must venture: a jail-break
 And re-creation. Sedges and wild rice
 Chase rivery pewter. The astonished cinders quake
 With rhizomes. All ways through the electric air
 Trundle candy-bright disks; they are desolate
 Toys if the soul's gates seal, and cannot bear,
 Must shudder under, creation's unseen freight.
 But soft, there is snow's legend: colour of mourning
 Along the yellow Yangtze where the wheel
 Spins an indifferent stasis that's death's warning.
 Asters of tumbled quietness reveal
 Their petals. Suffering this starry blur
 The rest may ring your change, sad listener.

The first two and a half lines introduce Avison's preoccupation with perception and its relation to creation. This in itself is a variant of a familiar Romantic theme. The opening violent verb suggests that visual perception is an active and deliberate process because, first of all, the eyes can certainly be closed easily enough. If one assumes that the "your" of the first line, and perhaps of the last as well, refers to the potential reader, then the opening of the poem also suggests that real perception involves not only the reader's eyes, but also his emotional response. This is the connotation of the term, "optic heart." Both with vision and with feeling, then, the reader must venture, must dare to break out of fixed forms that imprison him, if he is to perceive truly, if he is to

make his own meaning. In reading a poem, however, perceiving meaning is a form of re-creating the poet's meaning. Given the next few extremely enigmatic lines, the "jail-break" here may also be, for the reader, a bursting of the bonds of single meaning for language, a "re-creation" of language, and of the reader's perception through language, and in particular through the language of this poem. The reader, in reading the poem, is venturing forth, with "optic heart," transforming those strange black marks perceived by the eyes on the white paper into meaning, re-creating the poet's meaning in the process. The separation of the parts of the word "re-creation" reinforces this interpretation. Perception is not creation itself; reading is not writing.

The subsequent lines might also suggest this view. There is a certain visual quality to the Romantic language of the next sentence—"Sedges and wild rice/Chase rivery pewter."—but it is not really enough to warrant that stress on visual perception in the opening lines. This is where the paradigmatics of the text prove interesting, since a study of O.E.D. meanings of these words reveals them to be much more than just visual and descriptive. Aside from the Miltonic and particularly the Keatsian echoes of "sedges,"¹⁸ it seems that a certain kind of sedge, the yellow sedge, is also known as wild iris. The link of iris with the eyes of line one through this hidden pun is not as gratuitous as may first appear, for it is one of many covert references to the iris that we shall see in the poem. The verb "chase" here can mean both the obvious drive or hunt, but it has a second meaning of adorning metal with embossed patterns, a meaning not to be ignored, given the object of the verb—"pewter." The expected "pewter-like river" or something of the sort is here reversed to "rivery pewter." The obsolete, though suggestive, adjective "rivery" points perhaps to the obsolete meaning of pewter as well. It was once a mixture of gold and silver. This yellow colour, which is to be important in the poem as a whole, appears here again, as with the sedges, on a second covert level of meaning.

On the first level, however, the dark grey/black of the tin and lead mixture we know today as pewter dominates, as it does in the subsequent sentence in the "cinders," the black, still combustible residue left after a burning. The puzzling adjective used to describe these cinders is "astonished." Again, the word proves to have a second, now obsolete, meaning beyond the obvious one of amazed, and significantly that meaning is one of being deprived of sensation, paralyzed, even turned to stone. This sense of the word fits

well with the active verb, "quake," as the rhizomes, below the surface, jolt the cinders out of their stillness and paralysis. The images of kinesis continue to build up—from the violence of the opening verb, "stuffs," through the venturing of the "optic heart," the "jail-break/And re-creation" and the chased "rivery pewter."

The rhizomes, plants with subterranean root-like horizontal stems from which grow leaves upward and roots downward, are chosen by the poet for several important reasons. First of all, the horizontal imagery of the "rivery pewter" is continued, through again a linking of the natural and kinetic ("rivery" and now "rhizomes") with the processed and static ("pewter" and now "cinders"). Second, the iris is a rhizome. The significance of the connecting of the iris as an eye/plant pun with the dark and horizontal imagery will be apparent in the sestet of the sonnet, but the hidden pun itself becomes important in the next four lines.

At this point the title element introduces itself for the first time and it is significant that it is in kinetic terms. The snow begins to fall. The sentence itself opens with "All ways" and therefore with the accentuation of the linking of time and space inherent in the temporal phrase "always." By separating the parts of the word, the kinetic temporal side of the term is linked to the spatial, preparing the reader for the "electric" space of the air. Through the "ways," then, of the charged air "trundle" disks, snowflakes. To trundle can also, like so many words in this poem, have two meanings. It can signify to move easily and rapidly as the syntagmatic ordering of the sentence would suggest. Paradigmatically, however, a second level of sense exists which might undercut this, for to trundle can also mean to move unsteadily. This conflicting duality of meaning predicts and forewarns the reader of the conditional clause in the rest of the sentence: "They are desolate/Toys if the soul's gates seal . . ." The semantic ambiguity of the word "trundle" here underlines on another level its somewhat jarring contrast with the earlier, more Romantic tone and diction, perhaps signaling to the reader that a change has begun to occur with the advent of the snow.

The "candy-bright" crystalline disks which "trundle" present several possible levels of interpretation; all involve perception, however. The snowflakes in the air appear as flat disks to the human eye. That eye itself has a coloured iris that is also a disk. These bright snow disks are, according to the poet, "desolate/Toys" if the eyes "seal." The reference to the eyes as

"soul's gates" marks another switch in diction and tone, as if another level of discourse were being signaled. At any rate, the flakes, if unperceived or not understood, lose their meaning for the reader/observer and become neglected trifles. The verb used to describe the action of the eyes here, "seal," can in this context be intransitive, in which case the eyes fasten themselves shut as with a seal, and ignore creation's "freight" which is then quite literally "unseen." Or the verb can be transitive and if so, the eyes are then able to authenticate, to set a seal on "creation's unseen freight." This would mean that the eyes of the reader cannot see the poet's meaning directly; hence it remains "unseen." The reader can only authenticate that meaning in re-creating it for himself.

The "soul's gates" are those gates from which the "jail-break" must occur. But here they "cannot bear" the imperceptible, or deliberately ignored, "unseen" burden of creation. The verb, bear, is again one which operates on many levels. The eyes cannot stand or withstand, literally or figuratively, the burden, for we have seen that creation is not their function. Bear can also mean give birth to, and in this case, the above meaning is reinforced in that the eyes cannot bear forth creation's "freight" which is, after all, "unseen." This reading would be further supported by interpreting bear also as a pun on bare: the eyes do not reveal or uncover what is created, but rather, through perception, re-create it.

The snowflakes' falling action here becomes a vehicle for the poet to write of perception. But it is also true that the lines of the poem in which they fall become a means by which the reader learns both the nature and the limits of his very act of reading. At this point in the sonnet, at the end of the octave, the kinetic energy connected with both this perception of the snowfall and the earlier dark horizontal imagery begins to take on more sinister connotations: the earlier enlivening vibrating "quake" of line four becomes "shudder" by line eight, as the cold descends from the sky in the form of the falling snow. Perhaps the emotion of fear is also suggested by "shudder." In fact, in the sestet of the poem, this fear is actually realized, as kinesis is finally overpowered by stasis, and the threat of death. The archaic and literary opening of this part of the sonnet, "But soft," is a signal to the reader, a signal with imperative force used to enjoin silence, and also to warn the reader, to tell him to *listen*. In a poem whose emphasis has been on the sense of sight, this change of mode of perception is noteworthy. The reader's attention is then drawn to "there" where he will find

"snow's legend." "There," as opposed to here, may be the octave; and there the reader does find the story of the snow as it was falling. He also finds the legend, the inscription, the writing, of that snow figuratively in those black kinetic images of lines 3 to 5, and more literally in those black print marks on the white page. The etymological root of "legend" is *legere*, to read, and so the reader is indirectly linked to the perception of both of these images of black and white.

The presentation for the first time, however, of the very cold and white associations of the actual word, snow, only in the sestet introduces into the poem a much more negative note, one that recalls the image of poetry as "cased in white glare" (the page's frame) of "Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet Against Sonnets." Thus, the suggestion is that the fallen snow becomes an image of the white page. This black/white imagery of "snow's legend" is picked up again in the next words, as the reader follows the directing colon: "colour of mourning." In our culture, this colour is black and the reader immediately makes this association by paradigmatic ordering; however, the syntagmatic context of the poem, as continued on the following line ("Along the yellow Yangtze") makes clear that it is also white, the Chinese colour of mourning. Since Avison has punned often in the sonnet already, it is hard not to see also the colour of *morning* here, yellow perhaps, a colour association reinforced by the "yellow Yangtze" of the next line. We have already noted yellow appearing on the second covert level of meaning in the octave (lines 3 and 4) in connection with both the iris or yellow sedge, and the pewter, once an amalgam of gold and silver. In other words, the colour links by association both perception by the iris or eye, and the lines of writing, since the dark pewter was chased or embossed with a pattern. The Yangtze River reference further supports this connection for the pewter too was "rivery," horizontal and flowing.

In the octave, the disks trundled, but in the sestet, although superficially the same visual image is suggested in the phrase "the wheel/Spins," the verb "spins" is here transitive, and not a parallel intransitive one. This wheel spins "an indifferent stasis." Given the "optic heart" image of the second line of the poem, it is difficult to avoid the connotations of the original medical meaning of "stasis" here. The word is used to refer to the stagnation of the circulation of the blood. The kinesis of the octave is now being brought to a halt. This frozen stasis after the snow has fallen is

"death's warning." Life is endangered, as it was in the overtly self-conscious "Butterfly Bones": "The cyanide jar seals life, as sonnets move/towards final stiffness." Kinesis becomes stasis, an "indifferent" stasis. As well as meaning impartial, this adjective can also mean neutral in electrical quality. In other words, the charged "electric" air of line five is neutralized; the action of the octave has stopped, as has the snowfall.

In line twelve, Avison introduces the image of the snowflakes as "Asters." This is not the addition of a new image, but rather the culmination of a chain that has been building up to form what we earlier called the "archiseme." We have seen that the never directly named iris can refer to that flat circular disk of the eye as presented in the first and sixth lines. It can also suggest the plant, the "rhizomes" and the yellow "sedges." It also, however, is the name of a minute planetary body revolving around the sun, that is, the seventh *asteroid*. "Aster," itself an obsolete word for star, is also a flower with radiated petals and a yellow disk at the centre. Here the asters do indeed "reveal/Their petals," or the radiating links that connect this image to all the other overt and covert ones involving perception, reading, and the falling of snowflakes. This is not "creation's unseen freight" that cannot be borne by the eyes; it is, instead, the proper work of perception.

The asters in the syntagmatic context of the poem, however, are "of tumbled quietness." This phrase has a double connotation, referring to a lack of both motion and sound. Therefore the stasis of the now fallen snowflakes (they "tumbled" in the past), or the stasis of the white page, now lies in stillness, in silence. If the sound of the adjective "tumbled" recalls the sound of "Trundle" in line six, this would only reinforce, by ironic similarity, the contrast between the past activity of the octave, and the present stillness of the sestet. The tumbling precedes the quiet. Following the establishing of this still silence, the last sentence is addressed to a "sad listener," not a reader, as we might have supposed. The repose and quiet, the "rest," connected here with aural perception contrasts with the activity linked with visual perception from the first line of the octave to the last. In this sestet, however, we have found only stasis. Since the reader was urged to *listen* in silence in the first line of this part of the poem ("But soft"), here the truly obedient reader would become the final disappointed "sad listener." Apart from the obvious meaning of the word, "sad" also has a now obsolete meaning of sated or satisfied, as if the listener may well have the

world stuffed in at his ears, if not at his eyes. Ears cannot "seal" or at least not as easily as can eyes. In that case, the "quietness," the "rest" may indeed "ring" or sound paradoxically loud to the sated and necessarily passive listener. But the verb "ring" is transitive here and it is the listener's change that is rung. While the phrase "ring your change" may suggest ringing the changes, going through all the possible combinations in a bell-ringing, it also has a second level of connotation as well as denotation. "Ring" can mean enclose or encircle too, and the "change" which is so imprisoned by this "rest" is perhaps the exchange of the visual for the aural in the sonnet. The imagery of the active "jail-break" of the "optic heart" of line two has also been exchanged for that of the encircling, entrapping stasis associated with aural perception.

The visual "starry blur" is therefore definitely to be endured, suffered, like "creation's unseen freight," and this connection is perhaps even more evident if, by "blur," the poet means to suggest, not so much a confused dimness, as its original meaning of a smear made by brushing ink when wet. The reader, then, is enjoined to suffer the black marks on the white page, as he reads and re-creates the meaning of the action of falling snow, the action that suggested the image of the "starry blur" in the first place. If he does not do so, if he decides to shut his eyes to this, he is reminded of the earlier threat: "they are desolate/Toys if the soul's gates seal." In fact he is threatened by a static "rest," not urged to an active "jail-break." He becomes, instead of a reader, only a "sad listener."

The act of listening is itself somewhat static and passive, if only because not easily preventable. Ears have no lids to close. Perception, and reading as an act of visual perception, are more deliberate and active. Reading is an action in which the eyes and the understanding, the "optic heart," work to make meaning of the kinetic "legend" of snow. Fallen silent snow, like the blank and figuratively silent white page, may be static but the process of the falling of the snow, and the lines recounting its falling, are both full of activity. The eyes' act of following the black marks in time and space, across the page, is also active as well as re-creative. Creation itself, the act of the author, is "unseen"; the eyes can only re-create meaning through perception. The poem itself, as a static object, is "Snow," as the title reveals. Only when read with understanding by venturing eyes and heart does it come alive and leave behind the cold "final stiffness" of the frozen sonnet form on

the physical white page. The horizontal, dark images in the poem flow and vibrate. The "unseen" iris, or the "archiseme" that ties the poem together, is both what is ultimately perceived by the reader and what literally does the perceiving.¹⁹

The function of the Romantic language and particularly the Keatsian echo now becomes more evident. It seems that the poem can indeed be read as one within the Romantic tradition of the expression within the poem itself of a fascination with the shared processes of life and art, with the relations between nature, poetry, and human perception and understanding. At the end of Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," the knight-at-arms has shut the lady's "wild wild eyes" and is left on the "cold hill side": ". . . the sedge has withered from the lake,/And no birds sing." The negative images of cold and silence are here analogous to the speaker's state. Perhaps Avison's use of the same images suggests the poet's fate if her reader's "wild wild eyes" are sealed and her creation's freight "unseen." After all, the yellow sedge is also known as the wild iris.

NOTES

1. "Each word, each phrase, each clause went to position, Each Sentence regimented like a lockstep."
In "Towards the Last Spike" in Milton Wilson, ed., *Poets Between the Wars* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967, 1969); p. 48. All further page references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
2. As has been pointed out by W.H. New in his "The Identity of Articulation: Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike*" in his *Articulating West* (Toronto: New Press, 1972), pp. 32-42.
3. "Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens" in Milton Wilson, ed., *Poets Between the Wars*, p. 164.
4. There is the filter of innocence which "selected only beauty" and that of guilt which sees the "black inferno" and the "cold fires of salt" in "Photos of a Salt Mine" in Milton Wilson, ed., *Poetry of Mid-Century* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964), pp. 173-4.
5. See pp. 17, 34, 68 of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* (Toronto: Anansi, 1970). All further page references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
6. Tom O'Folliard's death appears on p. 7 and again on pp. 50-51; Charlie Bowdre's on p. 12 and p. 22. Pp. 48 and 76ff. continue the narrative from p. 22.
7. Imagery that appears relating directly to Billy's death (pp. 46, 95, 104) also appears at other points, such as pp. 21, 38, 40-73.
8. See also her novels, *The Edible Woman* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969) and *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), in which cameras have a decidedly threatening function.
9. "Atwood's Gorgon Touch", *Studies in Canadian Literature*, II, 2 (Summer 1977), 146-163.
10. *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 48. All subsequent page references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
11. See W.H. New, "The Mind's Eyes (I's) (Ice): The Poetry of Margaret Avison" in his *Articulating West*, pp. 234-258.

12. *Winter Sun* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 19.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
14. *Margaret Avison* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970), pp. 10-11.
15. Although Avison employs the Shakespearean sonnet rhyming form of three quatrains (abab cdcd efef) and a couplet (gg), use is also made of the Petrarchan form in the sharp differentiation in theme between the octave and the sestet. This utmost utilization of the two possible variants suggests that Avison is trying to mitigate the "final stiffness" of the sonnet form of which she writes in "Butterfly Bones; or Sonnet against Sonnets." She also does not respect line and unit endings between quatrains one and two, and the final couplet is not fully filled by the last sentence.
16. What Wimsatt calls "simply considered, the nature of birds and trees and streams" in "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery" in *The Verbal Icon* (1954; rpt. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. 104.
17. See Yury Lotman, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, ed. and trans. by D. Barton Johnson (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976), pp. 37-38.
18. Milton's "Lycidas," l. 104, and more significantly the refrain of Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci": "The sedge has withered from the lake,/And no birds sing." That the state of the knight-at-arms is directly related to the barren and silent landscape will be of interest later in our analysis of Avison's poem.
19. One might argue that the eye can translate visual into aural images: the silent inner ear then makes meaning, as in the functioning of puns. But in the poem, the main pun, the iris, is invisible, and therefore doubly inaudible and impossible to perceive by the "sad listener," although the reader who reads on a paradigmatic level might perceive it.